CHICAGO JOURNALS

Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II . The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture.
The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture by Ronald Smelser; Edward J. Davies
Review by: Benjamin L. Alpers
The American Historical Review, Vol. 113, No. 5 (December 2008), p. 1578
Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the American Historical Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/ahr.113.5.1578
Accessed: 12/12/2011 13:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The University of Chicago Press and *American Historical Association* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Historical Review*.

http://www.jstor.org

this history of visual media. The book's underlying aim of resituating the locus of religious experience, moreover, holds great import for future studies of American religious history. The intriguing narrative will enrich undergraduate courses across fields of study in the humanities, and the volume's sophisticated style of mapping race and religion in popular culture will challenge and rarify graduate seminars while advancing future scholarship on the subject.

Sylvester A. Johnson
Indiana University

Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II. *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2008. Pp. xii, 327. Cloth $75.00, paper $21.99.

Over the last half century, Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II argue, many Americans have embraced a mythical version of the Nazi-Soviet conflict in the East, a vision in which the Wehrmacht, and even the Waffen SS, are understood as essentially noble and apolitical institutions that fought a "clean" war against the USSR and were led by selfless military geniuses. The authors are understandably disturbed by the popularity of these accounts of the Eastern Front, both because they are wildly inaccurate and because they whitewash German war crimes in which the military and its leadership were active participants.

After the war, the Western Allies initially tried to hold the German military accountable for many of Nazi Germany's war crimes. But this policy changed with the emerging Cold War. The former Wehrmacht officers had impeccable anticommunist credentials and a personal knowledge of the Soviet army at war. U.S. authorities asked Franz Halder, former leader of the German General Staff, to assemble a group of Wehrmacht officers to write accounts of the war in the East. Known informally as the "Halder Group," these officers managed to rehabilitate their reputations while building a decades-long place for themselves in American and West German military planning.

Halder also published pamphlets that blamed the German failures and crimes in the East entirely on Adolf Hitler himself, thus exculpating the Wehrmacht. Other German military memoirists presented similar portraits of their prowess and innocence. A number of German popular histories and novels lauded the bravery of the German military in the East. This material soon found its way in translation to the United States, where it gained a following among both military professionals and amateur military history buffs.

In the United States, popular historians, whom Smelser and Davies label "the gurus," helped spread the mythic view of the Eastern Front through a series of books and websites that even celebrated the Waffen SS. The gurus were, in turn, followed by people Smelser and Davies call "romancers," war gamers and historical re-enactors who enjoy taking on German military roles. Their views of the war in the East have received wider circulation through such institutions as the Military Book Club and the History Channel.

The authors present a discomfiting portrait of American views of the Eastern Front. They are to be commended for exploring sources such as websites and war games that, while not usually studied by historians, are places where Americans encounter and enact World War II memory. But the authors' analysis of their material is not entirely convincing. Smelser and Davies argue that the purpose of the myth of the Eastern Front was "to wipe out the memory of the Soviet Union as our ally during World War II, as well as to integrate our former enemies, the Germans, into the defensive structure of the West, and in doing so revalidate ourselves historically" (p. 81). This explanation works very well for the U.S. military's embrace of the Halder Group. However, the imperatives of geopolitics cannot so easily explain the attraction of the myth of the Eastern Front to a broader U.S. public, especially since the end of the Cold War.

At the heart of their analysis, Davies and Smelser present an extended comparison between neo-Confederate views of the Civil War and mythic views of the Eastern Front (pp. 80–89). This is an excellent analogy. But the authors present only similarities between the two cases. As with any historical analogy, the best comparison would necessarily involve tracking differences as well, two of which, in particular, Davies and Smelser underplay. First, neo-Confederate views of the Civil War usually argue for the essential justice of the Confederate cause as a whole. In contrast, most (though not all) apologists for the behavior of the German military in the East try to distinguish between the ills of Nazism and Hitler himself on the one hand, and the supposedly "clean" efforts of the German military on the other. The second major difference between the two Lost Causes is that one, the Civil War, directly involved the United States. Indeed, neo-Confederate myths helped underwrite the post-Civil War return of white supremacy in the South. For most Americans, the myth of the Eastern Front can serve no such clear instrumental function. A richer explanation of the American embrace of Eastern Front mythology would involve considering it in a broader cultural-historical context than this book provides, including, for example, U.S. views of World War II, Germany, and military conflict in general.

None of this, however, should take away from the book's accomplishment. In carefully tracing the ways in which Americans have misunderstood the war in the East, Smelser and Davies have made a significant addition to the growing literature on the public memory of World War II.

Benjamin L. Alpers
University of Oklahoma

Tony Shaw. *Hollywood's Cold War*. (Culture, Politics, and the Cold War.) Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2007. Pp. x, 342. Cloth $98.00, paper $29.95.